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AUTHOR	Ascher, Carol
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ABSTRACT

Recent findings on the academic achievement of Hispanic students are digested in this paper. Data are derived from the study, "Make Something Happen," which was conducted by the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics, and presents comprehensive findings on Hispanic education drawn from a special analysis of the Hispanic cohort of the "High School and Beyond" national longitudinal study, findings from commissioned topic papers, site visits to inner-city schools across the country, and a variety of previously existing research. Findings are organized under the following headings: background; language instruction; the work-school linkage; and social supports and school-community ties. The digest concludes with a list of recommendations for improving high school education for Hispanics, including the following: (1) the provision of a strong academic core for all students; (2) English language instruction for all Hispanic high school students (but Spanish core curriculum courses for non-English speakers); (3) Spanish language courses to make Spanish speakers literate in Spanish; (4) counteracting the high number of Hispanic dropouts by increasing the schools' involvement in their students' needs and desires to work; and (5) increasing the amount of guidance counseling offered to Hispanic students, the number of Hispanic teachers and administrators, and schools' communication with Hispanic parents. (KH)

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RAISING HISPANIC ACHIEVEMENT

BY

Carol Ascher

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority Education / Box 40
Teachers College / Columbia University
New York, New York 10027

(212) 678-3433

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Raising Hispanic Achievement

The majority of Hispanic students enter high school with educational and career aspirations as high as any other group in our society. Yet the overall rate of dropouts among young Hispanics is estimated to range from 20 to 40 percent. Moreover, of those who drop out, forty percent do so before reaching the tenth grade, and twenty-five percent of Hispanics who enter high school are over-age. The recent two-volume study, *"Make Something Happen,"* conducted by the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics, presents comprehensive findings on Hispanic education drawn from a special analysis of the Hispanic cohort of the "High School and Beyond" national longitudinal study, findings from commissioned topic papers, and site visits to inner-city schools around the country, as well as the variety of previously existing research.

Background

Hispanics are the youngest and fastest growing population in the nation. Almost a third are under the age of 15 and two-thirds are under 34. A high birth rate combined with immigration will produce a rapid growth over the next years, resulting in a Hispanic population of 25-30 million, or about eleven percent of the total population, by the year 2000. Since the number of high school students is generally declining, if the percentage of Hispanic students who graduate from high school were increased from the current 55 to 80 percent over the next ten years, Hispanics could potentially account for 15 percent of all graduating seniors.

Today, an estimated four-fifths of the Hispanic students attending public school were born in the United States. Hispanics are highly urbanized: 85 percent live in metropolitan regions. About 70 percent are concentrated in Texas, California, and the metropolitan areas of New York, Miami and Chicago. Over two-thirds of all Hispanics attend schools where more than half of the students are minorities. Because of their geographic concentration, Hispanics will become the majority of the school and work population in many areas over the next two decades.

While many Hispanics have found economic and professional success, nearly 29 percent still fall below the poverty line--almost three times the rate for Anglos, and just under the rate for blacks. One reason for this high poverty rate may be the prevalence of female-headed households; for example, fifty-five percent of all Puerto Rican students live in single-parent families. Hispanic unemployment, particularly acute among Puerto Ricans, is from 40-50 percent higher than the national rate. In most areas of the country, Hispanics also suffer from underemployment.

At each stage of education, the Hispanic completion rate is lower than that of any other group. Though the means of calculating dropout rates vary from city to city, the total Hispanic dropout rate in urban areas appears to range from a high of 80 percent in New York to a low of 23 percent in San Antonio, with Miami (32 percent), Los Angeles (50 percent) and Chicago (70 percent) lying in between. In 1982, the rate of Hispanic high school graduates who enrolled in college following graduation was 43 percent--compared to 52 percent for whites--and the majority went to community colleges, where their completion rate was low and their chance of transferring to a four-year college poor.

Educational Opportunity and Hispanic Achievement

The current well-documented problems in American secondary education that affect all American youth are doubly severe for Hispanics. Although the aspirations of the majority of Hispanics entering high school are as high as any other group in the society, Hispanic sophomores, who in 1980 took a battery of school-related achievement tests as part of the "High School and Beyond" survey, averaged well below national norms.

The discrepancy between the aspirations of Hispanic students and their measured achievement is partly explained by a number of school experiences that are, in fact, indicators of educational opportunity:

- Although Hispanics and Anglos take about the same number of high school courses, by senior year Hispanics have taken fewer academic courses than any other ethnic group.
- Forty percent of all Hispanic high school students are in a general track, 35 percent are in vocational programs, and only 25 percent are in an academic track.
- There is a lack of counseling to encourage Hispanics to enter academic courses that meet their ability and aspirations. Counseling, in general, is greatly understaffed. Some schools with predominantly Hispanic student bodies do not have Spanish-speaking counselors on staff.
- In 1980, 68 percent of all Hispanic students were in schools where more than half of the students were minorities--and this trend toward segregation will only increase in the next years. Moreover, these segregated schools almost always were (and are likely to continue to be) accompanied by inferior resources, deteriorating school facilities, and less experienced teachers.

Language Instruction

The National Commission found that, all over the country, Hispanic students and parents want to learn English and realize its critical importance for success. However, much like Anglo students and parents, Hispanics complain that the schools have been ineffective in teaching English. In 1980, according to the Commission's statistical data, 39 percent of all Hispanic sophomores--including both solely English speakers and students variously skilled in both Spanish and English--were enrolled in remedial courses in English. Yet about 35 percent of *all* the nation's sophomores were in the same remedial English courses. Thus language instruction seemed to be failing all types of students, and, in fact, Hispanics were not faring much worse than anyone else.

On the other side, the National Commission found that little is done to promote Spanish literacy among Hispanic students. The majority of Hispanic high school students are not literate in the Spanish language and on their own do not elect to study it. At present, only four percent of the Hispanic high school students study three or four years of Spanish.

The Work-School Linkage

Among Hispanic students who drop out of high school, the need and wish to work is a prime motivation. Forty-one percent of the males cite economic reasons for leaving school, while the main reasons Hispanic females give for leaving are the need to work (25 percent) and marriage and pregnancy (23 percent). Although many schools have instituted work/study programs geared to eleventh and twelfth graders, for Hispanic students, among whom nearly half of those who drop out do so before the tenth grade, these programs come too late.

Work is an equally important part of the lives of those Hispanic students who are able to remain in school. Hispanic males work more hours per week while attending school than any other ethnic group. However, even those students who remain in school are unlikely to receive the best possible prepara-

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tion for the world of work. Among those Hispanics enrolled in vocational education, the Commission found that few were attending the top-rated vocational education schools in their cities. Instead, Hispanic students were in programs that did not have state-of-the-art equipment, and so were being inadequately prepared to feed into the better jobs after graduation.

Social Supports and School-Community Ties

The tendency in recent years has been to de-emphasize the role of parents and the community in creating an effective educational environment. However, the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics found that, because of major realignments in the structure of the family, high unemployment, migration, and rapid ethnic transformation of neighborhoods, all of which wreak havoc on values, undermine dignity, and generate concrete new needs in the community, as well as alienate the community from the school, in working with Hispanics the schools must, in fact, reach out to parents and the community.

Based on site visits across the country, the National Commission found that the most successful schools for Hispanics were:

> those that had strong enduring links to the community they served and that encouraged--indeed required--that parents become partners in teaching and learning. These schools had strong, dedicated principals who created an atmosphere of high expectations for teachers and students. These were the schools that also had a number of Hispanic teachers and larger numbers of Hispanic adults in guidance, monitoring, and supervisory roles. They had close connections with the social service, health, and recreational programs that serve their students and their families (p. 28).

Recommendations for Improving High School Education for Hispanics

The recommendations of the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics parallel those of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, as well as other recent commissions, in their emphasis on a strengthened academic curriculum. However, because of its constituency, the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics addresses many of the complicated issues of teaching a diverse population.

Strong Academic Core For All Students

- A core curriculum of clearly defined academic content should be instituted for all students. It should include four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies, one-half year of computer science, and two years of foreign language.
- Electives beyond the basic academic courses should be considered as enrichments of the basic curriculum, and should reinforce the skills acquired in the basic academic courses.
- Learning should be paced to the students' competencies, but high expectations for all students should be related to the academic content requirements. Tracking should be eliminated, and extra time and help should be given to those students who need it, including through peer tutoring.
- Programs that recognize effective school practices for Hispanics should be increased, and networks should disseminate information about effective practices and techniques.

Language Instruction — English

- The English proficiency of all students should be formally assessed before they go to high school. A pre-high school summer term and an intensive freshman-year supplementary program should be provided for students who are deficient in English.
- Hispanic high school students should complete a basic English course with emphasis on writing, and writing should be an integral part of all subject courses.
- The high school curriculum should include a study of public speaking, the spoken word, and listening.
- For the non-English speaking high school student, a combination of the following strategies should be used: intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction; core curriculum classes in Spanish, or at least provision of classroom materials in Spanish, in conjunction with a Spanish-speaking tutor; early auditing of courses in English; an option of taking the graduation examination in Spanish for 17-18 year-olds who arrive late in their high school careers.
- Every high school should establish a volunteer corps of tutors and teaching assistants to foster English literacy in school and in the surrounding community.

Language Instruction — Spanish

- Spanish-speakers should be urged to take language courses that would make them literate in Spanish.
- Native Spanish speakers and native English speakers have different needs for Spanish instruction. Inattention to these differences may make classes in Spanish uninteresting to both groups.
- Students and other native speakers should be used as teaching assistants in high school Spanish at all levels.

Work-School Linkages

- Because so many Hispanic students leave school before they enter high school, both junior and senior high schools in the inner cities must increase their active involvement in their students' needs and desires to work.
- The business community and the schools should work together to design part-time and summer job strategies which link the school and the work place through worker readiness training, job counseling, job placement, and follow-up evaluations.
- Specific work/school strategies that have proven successful should be instituted. These include: special scheduling arrangements, jobs linked to school performance, school credit for certain kinds of work, transferability of credit between high school and evening General Educational Development (GED) classes, and summer jobs that combine employment with academic training.

Social Supports and School-Community Ties

- The number of in-school guidance counselors should be increased to provide more sustained personal attention to students and their parents.
- High school counselors should establish links with elementary and middle schools so that Hispanic students and their parents are made aware of career options and the academic requirements that relate to them before the students enter high school.
- The organization of schools should be more flexible to increase students' sense of belonging and the opportunity to learn.
- Increasing the numbers of Hispanic teachers, administrators, and counselors should be a priority.
- Hispanics from the community should be brought into the schools: to teach mini-courses and give lectures; to act as "grandparent monitors" in the halls; and through programs that serve both parents and students.
- In inner-city high schools where a large concentration of families confront an array of social and economic crises, the attendance-taking function of the homeroom teacher should be expanded to include monitoring the well-being of homeroom students and their parents.
- Hispanic parents must be made to feel welcome in the schools, and the schools must take responsibility for communicating with them, in Spanish if necessary.

— Carol Ascher

The material for this digest was taken from *"Make Something Happen": Hispanics and Urban High School Reform*, Volumes 1 and 2, by the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics, Hispanic Policy Development Project, Washington, D.C., 1984.

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